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## The Relationship between Mother Tongue and English Language

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### ABSTRACT

*The role of mother tongue in second language learning has been the subject of much debate and controversy. Most teachers feel that the use of L1 should be minimized and they feel guilty if they use it a lot. When challenged they find it difficult to say why. Against the use of L1, it is the general assumption that English should be learned through English, just as you learn your mother tongue using your mother tongue. But the idea that the learner should learn English like a native speaker does, or tries to 'think in English', is an inappropriate and unachievable thought. The role of mother tongue in teaching and learning of English has been discussed in literature. The influence of mother tongue is proved both positive and negative in teaching and learning of English. A learner's L1 is an important determinant of Second Language Acquisition. The L1 is a resource which learners use both consciously and subconsciously to help them arrange and re-arrange the L2 data in the input and to perform as best as they can. In an EFL context such as that found in developing countries where English is taught as a foreign language and students have very limited exposure to English other than in the classroom, the use of the mother tongue tends to be controversial and is often discouraged. Teachers are usually required to avoid using the mother tongue in the classroom even when there exists a need to do so. However, anecdotal evidence has shown that the moderate and judicious use of the mother tongue can indeed greatly aid and facilitate the learning and teaching of the foreign language. Given this situation, the study seeks to examine the relationship between mother tongue and English language.*

**KEYWORDS: Mother Tongue, English Language, English Language Learning**

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### INTRODUCTION

The mother tongue is part of man's personal, social and cultural identity. Mother tongue is the home language, the language a child supposed to know before one start schooling. It is this identification we get from speaking our mother tongue that enforces successful social patterns of acting and speaking. Salami, 2002 states that the diverse social backgrounds make it unique and appealing for society to recognize the use of mother tongue for language expressions. The mother tongue is an indispensable instrument for the development of intellectual, physical and moral aspects of human education. Habits, conducts, values, virtues, customs and beliefs are all formed and shaped through the mother tongue. Research also confirms that children learn best in

their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education (Shin, 2008). It is noted that children successfully retain their mother tongue while acquiring additional languages depends on several interacting factors. In language description, the mother tongue is classified as L1, while other language including English is L2 respectively.

The importance of English language acquisition as a stepping-stone for proficiency in other aspects of life cannot be over emphasized. The knowledge is important both for educational, economical and national development of a country. English is the official language of administration and commerce. It is major language of science. Above all, Salami (2002) had emphasized the importance of the use of English language in improving communication among the various ethnic groups in the country. He further highlighted the need for improving the quality of spoken and written English language among school children.

### **The Concept of Mother Tongue**

Mother tongue is defined as the language which a group of people considered to inhabitants of an area acquired in the early years and which eventually becomes their natural instrument of thoughts and communication (Awoniyi, 1978). Mother tongue is the first language that a person learned. In terms of that view, the person is defined as a native speaker of the first language, although one may also be a native speaker of more than one language if all of the languages were learned without formal education, such as through cultural immersion before puberty. Often a child learns the basics of the first language(s) from family (Wikipedia,2007). The mother tongue is the child's environment and is the natural basis on which verbal skills can be built, children learn through communicating in a language, which they understood. It is therefore generally accepted that in teaching and learning processes, the mother tongue of the child is of utmost importance. For one thing, it categorizes a large part of the child's environment, that is, it has names for most of the objects, actions, ideas, attributes and so on that are so important to him, as well as to any society.

Attitudes toward the use of the mother tongue in the language classroom have been subject to change. There was a time when the monolingual approach prevailed and the target language was considered to be the sole medium of communication to be used in the classroom and the use of the mother tongue was prohibited. Krashen (1981) and his followers argued that people learning foreign languages follow basically the same route as they acquire their mother tongue, hence the use of the mother tongue in the learning process should be kept to a minimum.

More recently, particularly during the past 15 years, this monolingual orthodoxy has lost its appeal, now considered "untenable on any grounds, be they psychological, linguistic or pedagogical" (Medgyes, 1994: 66). It has been argued that the exclusion of the mother tongue is often regarded as a criticism of the mother tongue as a language, thus rendering it a "second-class" language. This degradation of the mother tongue is seen as having harmful psychological effects on the learners (Nation,1990). At this juncture, it is very imperative to look at whether mother tongue has bearing on the English language usage among individuals. It is important to draw attention to the presence of the problems and to, on the basis of what will be found out, recommend what could be done to reduce them if they cannot be totally eradicated.

## **The Concept of English Language**

The term "English" is derived from *Anglisc*, the speech of the Angles—one of the three Germanic tribes that invaded England during the fifth century. The English language is the primary language of several countries, including Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and many of its former colonies, and the United States, and the second language in a number of multilingual countries, including India, Singapore, and the Philippines. It's an official language in several African countries as well, such as Liberia, Nigeria, and South Africa, but is spoken worldwide in more than 100 countries. It's learned around the world by children in school as a foreign language and often becomes a common denominator between people of different nationalities when they meet while traveling, doing business, or in other contexts.

According to Christine Kenneally in her book "The First Word," Today there are about 6,000 languages in the world, and half of the world's population speaks only 10 of them. English is the single most dominant of these 10. British colonialism initiated the spread of English across the globe; it has been spoken nearly everywhere and has become even more prevalent since World War II, with the global reach of American power."The influence of the English language has also spread globally through American pop culture, music, movies, advertising, and TV shows. A third of the world's population speaks English as a first or secondary language, over 2 billion people.

Tony Reilly noted an earlier estimate in "English Changes Lives" in Britain's *The Sunday Times*, "There are now estimated to be 1.5 billion English speakers globally: 375 million who speak English as their first language, 375 million as a second language and 750 million who speak English as a foreign language." English is ever adopting new words from other languages (350 languages, according to David Crystal in "English as a Global Language"). With so many sources behind its evolution, English is malleable, with words also being invented regularly as well. With the wide spread of English, mother tongue is neglected to great extent.

## **Roles of Mother Tongue in English Language Learning**

Incomplete first language skills often make learning other languages difficult. Cummins (2000) emphasizes, the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. When the mother tongue is promoted the concepts and literacy skills can transfer to the second language. Further, a high correlation between learning to read in mother tongue and subsequent reading achievement in the second language has been found (Koda,2005). In short, supporting development of the mother tongue enhances the development of the second language learning.

Most learners apply knowledge from their native language or mother tongue to the second language and this transfer can result in both positive and negative transfer. Positive transfer occurs when the meaning of items that are transferred is in line with the native speakers' notion of acceptability. Negative transfer occurs when the opposite happens resulting in errors. Negative transfer happens at a greater scale when the difference between two languages is big. The similarities and dissimilarities in word meanings and word forms affect how quickly a learner can acquire a foreign language (Odlin T, 1989: 77).The use of the first language provides individuals with a sense of security that enables them to learn with ease and in comfort. Mother

tongue serves social and cognitive functions in that they will who work in groups will discuss in their native language. This allows them to relate and have a sense of identity.

It was in recognition of the importance and contributions of mother tongue to education that made the Federal Ministry of Education in Collaboration with other educational statutory agencies include in the National Policy on Education published in 1977, revised in 1981, Section 2(ii) stated that “Government will ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community” also in section 3(xx) of the same National Policy on Education stated that: “Government will see to it that the medium of instruction in the primary school is initially the mother tongue of the immediate community and at a later stage English”. Section 1 also stated that “In addition to appreciating the importance of language in educational process, and as a means of preserving people’s culture, the government considers it in the best interest of national unity that each child should be encouraged to learn one of the three major languages other than his mother tongue”

The mother tongue therefore, is a part of a country’s culture; it conveys or transmits culture and itself in subjects to culturally conditioned attitudes and beliefs (Awoniyi, 1975). The positive results of the experiment in Mother Tongue Medium in universities and colleges empirically demonstrated the great advantages of mother tongue in primary education for scholastic attainment (Bamgbose, 1984) and even in the successful mastery of English as a second language. There are also other factors contributing to students’ poor performance in English language schools. These other factors are poor method of teaching, lack of textbooks, language background and lack of professional growth and development of teachers. On the whole, the performance of students in English language is poor and if the discovered factors are not tackled on time, it will cause a drastic decline in standard of education.

### **People’s Assertions on the Influence of Mother Tongue on English Language**

The excessive use of mother tongue can threaten the fluent use of English language. Some of the researchers believe that L1 should be avoided in FL class. Ellis (1984) claims that more language acquisition will take place if learners do not depend on their L1, or if they do not translate. Frequent use of mother tongue in foreign language class may create dependency on using it which can be an obstacle to learn target language in an appropriate way. Many linguists insisted that the target language be used for all purposes in the classroom, even when the reasons for using it remained unclear (Hawks, 2001, p.47). Students need as much exposure as possible to the target language in order to acquire it. That requires them to use the TL as much as possible. Target language acquisition depends on exposure, the more learners exposed to a language the better they will acquire it. Krashen encouraged language teachers’ maximum exposure to the target language. He stated that all the lesson or as much as possible should be in TL, and that there was a definite relationship between comprehensible input in TL and proficiency (Krashen, 1985, p.14). If teacher provides comprehensible input students may learn better. It may not always a good decision to use L1 in FL class. Atkinson (1987) suggests that L1 should be used not more than five percent of the time in the foreign language or second language classroom. Others such as Lewis and Hill (1992) agreed and said that the language being studied should be the mode of communication in the lesson. That means the FL lesson should be taught in FL, in order to maximize exposure, and thereby learning, is perhaps the key concept which monolingual supporters have based their approach on. Many ELT professionals maintain that too, much L1

use might deprive learners of valuable input in TL. They encouraged thinking in English rather than translating it into L1 and remembering it. Balanced and sensible use of mother tongue may increase the chance to acquire the target language quickly. Classroom situations can create various experiences for students such as real life situations through simulations (McDonald, 1993); if the teacher uses the MT to a great extent, students may lose the chance to benefit from these situations. Overuse of L1 may deprive them to think in target language.

### **Inclusion of Mother Tongue in Operational Language Policy as a Way to Alleviate Negative Influence of Mother Tongue on English Language**

Given the generalized prejudice, that characterizes mother tongue medium instruction particularly among individuals and educated elite, effective implementation of this model of education requires, à priori, that certain conditions be carefully put in place. Among these conditions are the following:

***An inclusive and operational language policy:*** Although the presence of language policy is not any guarantee for the implementation of English language education without neglecting mother tongue, it is undoubtedly an essential part of the overall process of educational innovation, it would be vital that the country adopts a workable policy. Such a policy should be inclusive by recognising and protecting the use of national languages alongside official language in school.

***Institution of a national sensitisation campaign for mother tongue education:*** Given the long decades of exclusive promotion of official languages and the deep-rooted attitudes that have developed over the years, the implementation of mother tongue-based schooling even if its positive influence on the promotion of English is clearly obvious. The challenge here is that the public is generally resistant to education based on the mother tongues. Overcoming this challenge is certainly not going to be an easy task. Among other strategies, there is need for a vast public campaign with the goal of bringing about a shift in the linguistic attitudes of the people. The primary goal of the campaign will be to sensitise and educate the public as well as specialised professional groups on the utility of mother tongue education in national development. Once they are convinced of the utility of this alternative approach to learning, they will themselves become agents of sensitisation.

***Compulsory mother tongue training for educators and educational officials:*** The success of mother tongue education depends substantially on competencies and abilities of those responsible for promoting the language at local and national levels. If they do not master the language, they will not be able to ensure its effective and efficient implementation in schools.

It will therefore, be of great importance that they are properly trained on the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of mother tongue education particularly at the primary level. Two actions are crucial here. In the first place, mother tongue education should be integrated into the curriculum of teacher training institutions in the country. In the second instance, seminars and refresher courses should be instituted at all levels to cater for those already active on the field.

***Mother tongue in official examinations:*** One of the reasons that account for the negative attitudes and consequently low adherence to mother tongue education is the perceived low prestige of national languages vis-à-vis the official languages. Studies reveal that pupils and parents value only those languages that are included in official examinations. Including

languages in official examinations represents their official recognition and symbolises the socio-political and economic importance of these languages in the nation, and as a result, benefit from all the advantages that accrue from such integration.

### **Conclusion**

According to the study, it is concluded that the level of development of children's mother tongue is a strong predictor of their second language development. When the mother tongue is promoted the concepts and literacy skills can transfer to the second language. Mother tongue influences individuals' performance in English language in both positive and negative direction. Positive transfer occurs when the meaning of items that are transferred is in line with the native speakers' notion of acceptability. Negative transfer occurs when the opposite happens resulting in errors. It should not also be ignored that excessive use of mother tongue can threaten the fluent use of English language.

### **Recommendations**

1. There should be a review in the language policy on education. The review according to them should contain recommendations that will make pupils to have exposure to the subject quite early from the primary school irrespective of the advantages of mother tongue.
2. The teaching and learning of English should be more practical in our schools, and also the number of years of study and teaching periods should be increased.
3. Materials for learning the subject should be supplied. This will be the time when the problem of failure in the subject will hopefully be overcome. So a firm foundation in English language is very important for better performance.
4. Having discovered that the use of mother tongue in school contributes or influence students' performance in English, English language should be used as a medium of communication within and outside the classroom. Both teachers and students should endeavor to improve their proficiency level of the language.
5. Teachers need to do more than teaching theories in class. Proper method of teaching and appropriate instructional materials should be adopted to compliment teacher's knowledge. This goes a long way in influencing teaching and learning process in English language. Material(s) selected should be commensurable with grade or maturity level of students.

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